

5. VARIATION RECORDED IN THE IRIS, BILL, LEG AND FOOT COLOURATION
IN CATTLE EGRET *BUBULCUS IBIS*

A nesting colony of cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis* was spotted at Zila Garden, Rajkot. They started nesting during early June, 2000. During regular observations, I recorded variations in four birds of the colony. The iris and bill colour of all the breeding birds in the colony was golden yellow, but in these four birds, the iris was red and bill reddish-violet. This variation among breeding populations of cattle egret has not been recorded by Ali and Ripley (1987), Heinzel *et al.* (1973), and Sonobe and Usui (1993).

The breeding birds had pink legs and feet, while the non-breeding birds had black legs and feet. The actual changing of colours was not recorded. (The author has submitted photographic evidence of the observations — Eds.)

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6. RECORD OF A NESTING COLONY OF PAINTED STORK
MYCTERIA LEUCOCEPHALA AT MAN-MARODI ISLAND IN THE GULF OF KUTCH

(With one text-figure)

Gujarat is well endowed with nesting sites of painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, both in the vicinity of freshwater inland wetlands and on the coast. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) observes that these birds nest "more numerously on the coastal areas where marine food is easily available". However, very little is known about the coastal nesting grounds of the painted stork in Gujarat, with the exception of the heronries at Bhavnagar that have been well documented by Parasharya and Naik (1990). In this note, I wish to record the existence of a large nesting colony of painted stork on the Man-Marodi Island in the Gulf of Kutch. This site was studied while I was accompanying teams of students from the Centre for Environment Education, Ahmedabad, to the Sundervan campsite at Beyt Dwarka during 1999-2000.

Man-Marodi is a rocky island quite close to the coast, off Positra, near the mouth of the Gulf of Kutch (Fig. 1). The island itself appears as a large block of rocks some 2-3 sq. km in area, rising at least 20 m above the level of the water. The chief vegetation on this island is scrub and small trees such as *Acacia* and *Salvadora*, interspersed by dense stands of *Euphorbia*. On a first visit to Man-Marodi on October 20, 1999, at least 100 nests of painted stork were observed. Most of the nests had 1 or 2 chicks. The nestlings were in an advanced stage, possibly a month old as suggested by the colour of their plumage and bill, indicating that nesting activity at this site must have started in end August i.e. towards the end of the monsoon. Since the principal vegetation of the island is quite short, most of the nests were observed at *c.* 1.5 m above ground

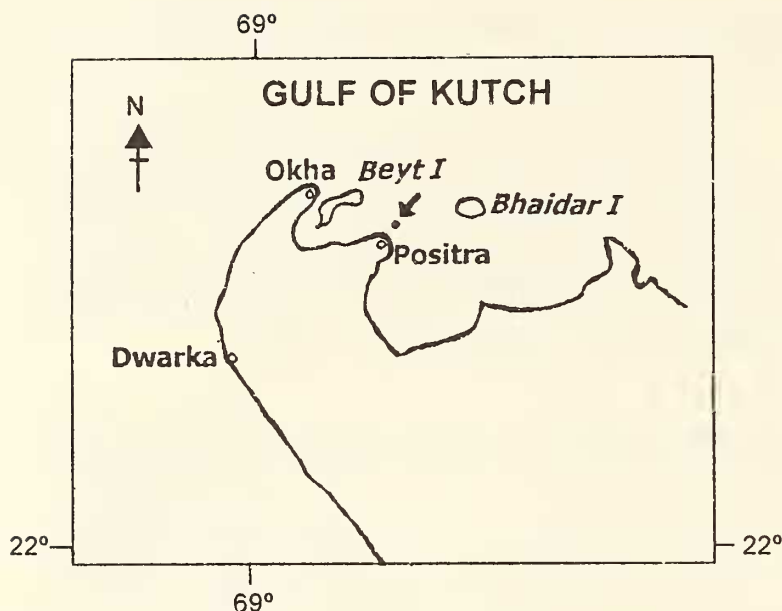


Fig. 1: Map of Man-Marodi Island (Indicated by arrow) in the Gulf of Kutch

level and quite closely packed. Interestingly, some nests were made by stacking sticks and twigs on *Euphorbia* stands. On November 30, 2000, when this island was visited again, no painted storks were seen, although information gathered from local fishermen revealed that the birds had nested during that year too.

This heronry has, of course, not gone unnoticed. In his exhaustive review on the birds of Gujarat, Khacher (1996) refers to Man-Marodi without actually naming it when he writes, "There is an unusual nesting colony of the painted stork on a sandstone island in the Gulf of Kachchh". Possibly, what makes Man-Marodi unusual is that out here, in the absence of true thermals in the sea, painted stork appear to take advantage of the wind hitting the rock face, which creates the effect of thermals and enables the birds to soar in the sky and gain altitude when embarking on food finding missions (Lavkumar Khacher, *pers. comm.*). The use of *Euphorbia*

as a nesting substrate is another interesting feature of this heronry.

Why is this island preferred by large numbers of painted stork for nesting? Firstly, the closely packed vegetation affords a good substrate for nesting in colonies. Secondly, the island being surrounded by the sea on all sides and not being visited by humans too frequently, the birds probably find it to be a safe place. But having said this, I may also mention the problems. For instance, common crows take their toll on painted stork eggs. Reportedly, jackals sometimes visit this island, swimming across from the mainland or from the neighbouring islands during low tide, and can pose a danger for the nestlings. Thirdly, although no humans are known to inhabit this island as of now, local fishermen sometimes anchor their boats in the vicinity of Man-Marodi and reportedly, poach upon the nestlings.

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